

What is Health Literacy?

Health literacy is the ability to read, understand, and act on health care information.

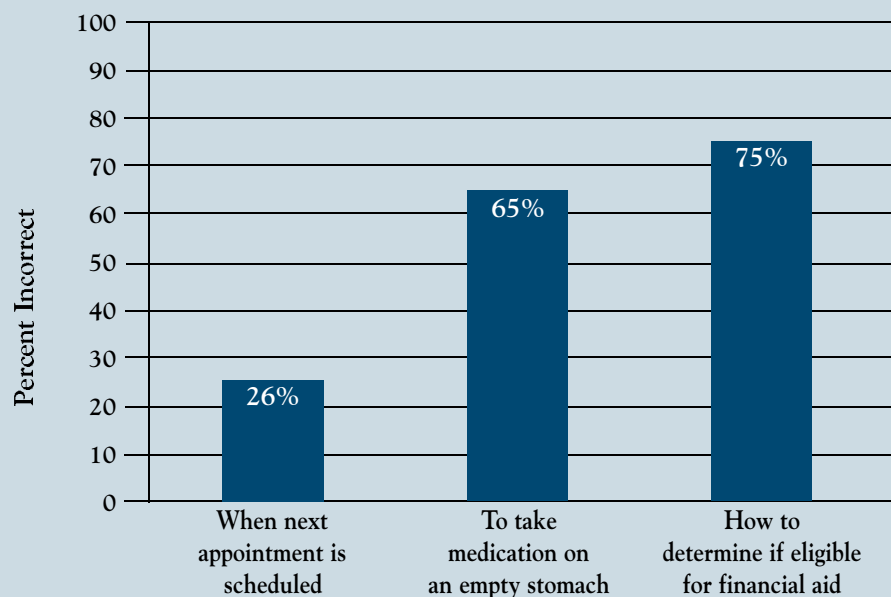
Healthy People 2010 defines health literacy as “the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions.”¹

The AMA Council of Scientific Affairs more specifically defines *functional* health literacy as “the ability to read and comprehend prescription bottles, appointment slips, and the other essential health-related materials required to successfully function as a patient.”²

- A study of 483 asthma patients found that although two-thirds reported graduating from high school, only 60% could read above the sixth-grade level. Reading ability was the single strongest predictor of asthma knowledge. Twice as many patients reading below the third-grade level had poor metered-dose inhaler technique as patients reading at high-school level (89% vs. 48%).³

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Many Public Hospital Patients* Do Not Understand Basic Health Care Information⁴



*% of 979 low-income patients

Source: Williams, et al., 1995.

People with low functional health literacy are less likely to:⁵⁻⁷

- Understand written and oral information given by physicians, nurses, pharmacists, and insurers.
- Be able to navigate the health system to obtain needed services.
- Act upon necessary procedures and directions such as medication and appointment schedules.

People with low functional health literacy are more likely to:⁸⁻¹⁰

- Receive health care services through publicly financed programs, even after controlling for such factors as age, education, or socioeconomic status.
- Incur higher health care costs. A study of Medicaid patients found those reading below third-grade level had average annual health care costs four times those of the overall Medicaid population.

Several studies have indicated poor health status is disproportionately high among patients with low functional health literacy. For example:

- A study of 212 low-income men found that low literacy is a better predictor than race or age of advanced prostate cancer.¹¹
- A study of 182 HIV-positive adults found that those with low functional health literacy were more likely to miss treatment doses than those with high health literacy because of confusion about the instructions.¹²

References

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